

Defending Reason: The Priority of Rationality Over Ideology

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Proponents of the Enlightenment goal of emancipation through reason have tended to regard their own views as based solely on reason and so have held themselves to be free from the blind adherence to tradition that they assailed in their opponents. But recent critics of the western tradition of rationality have urged that it is itself a *tradition* and, some have argued, a highly suspect one at that, "ending in hidden forms of violence and despairing nihilism."¹ Thus, while emancipationists have tended to see themselves as involved in a struggle *between* reason and tradition, with reason on their side, their critics charge that the emancipationists are simply in the blind grip of their own tradition, unable to see the costs of the view of life they endorse. More generally, cognitive and moral relativists argue that the favored criteria of truth by means of which views are sorted into "enlightened" and "unenlightened" simply reveal biases about what counts as knowledge and so cannot be used to prove that one view of the world is superior to another. Some urge the abandonment of the universalistic pretensions of the emancipatory view in favor of a more historical approach, based in the solidarity of local communities. Furthermore, the contemporary conception of education as emancipation has been held to be entwined with liberalism and hence subject to the critiques generated by recent explorations of the limits of liberal thinking. Some argue that the liberal vision of a rational social order has supported a tyrannical rationalization of society by increasing social control in the name of efficiency and the scientific outlook. It is said that reason itself has been co-opted in this process: reduced to instrumental reason and technical rationality, it no longer has emancipatory potential. And postmodernists proclaim the death of the "grand narrative" of emancipation. They declare the meaninglessness of efforts to provide universal criteria for grounding the distinction between knowledge and power needed to sustain the narrative. Thus there has been a growing awareness among followers of the tradition of emancipation through reason that its ideals must be defended.

Harvey Siegel has been a substantial contributor to this important enterprise through his efforts to justify critical thinking (which Siegel regards as the "educational cognate of rationality"²) as an educational ideal. Given Siegel's commitments to rationality, he is particularly concerned to show that educational ideals such as critical thinking can themselves be rationally evaluated. Thus he has tried to solve what he refers to as the "problem of ideology," the view that "ideals...are...determined by prior ideological commitment" such that "a 'justified' educational ideal is simply an ideal which is sanctioned by one's ideology."³ In general, Siegel argues that "rationality transcends ideology"; thus he rejects the view that educational ideals depend upon prior ideological commitments which cannot themselves be evaluated. For Siegel, rationality is prior to ideology; for his opponents, "what counts as a reason depends on what one's ideology recognizes as a reason....[Thus] rationality itself...is ideology dependent."⁴

Responding to this challenge leads Siegel to develop strong requirements for rational evaluation, requirements that I will argue cannot in general be met. Fortunately, however, for those who do hold to the rational ideal, there is an alternative conception of rational evaluation, not subject to the same objections, that is sufficient to block the conclusions of Siegel's opponents. (Indeed, Siegel himself sometimes seems to be moving toward the alternative conception, or so I shall argue.) We need not fear, as I think Siegel does, that if his original requirements for rational evaluation cannot be met, then our commitments to our educational ideals are "arbitrary" and all efforts at evaluation are "doomed." My strategy in this paper will be first to develop more fully the problem Siegel hopes to

solve by a theory of rational evaluation. Then I will elaborate the two accounts of rationality which I find in Siegel's work and evaluate their potential as solutions to the ideology problem. Finally, I will consider briefly the upshot of this discussion of rationality for critical thinking as an educational ideal.

THE PROBLEM OF IDEOLOGY

As a working definition, Siegel adopts a "very general characterization of ideology" as "a general framework that shapes individual consciousness, guides and legitimates belief and action, and renders experience meaningful."⁵ He comments that, according to the ideologist, "ideology shapes consciousness," that is, "thought is determined by the social context in which we happen to find ourselves."⁶ Thus I assume that the "general framework" in question here is to be thought of as a *social* possession, as a set of cultural traditions for interpreting experience, guiding action, etc. The problem of the relationship between rationality and ideology, then, becomes a question of whether ideologies can themselves be rationally evaluated.

Can one ever *rationally* evaluate and reject or modify views of the world which one has come to hold because they are traditional beliefs of one's culture, class, historical period, and professional group? It is an unsurprising truth that as a result of growing up in a particular social milieu, individuals come to think, act, and feel in ways that are frequently congruent with the beliefs, actions, and emotional responses of those around them. Of course, as Edward Shils reminds us, this truth can be stretched too far; in no society has the life of its members been completely guided by traditional beliefs and patterns and in every age life has presented new problems that have called forth new solutions. Still, the pervasiveness of the past is undeniable. But equally undeniable is the fact that some people do come to reject the beliefs of their ancestors and to develop significantly different views of the world. And, of course, traditions themselves change over time whether through internal criticism, by confronting new problems, or from the pressure of alien traditions. However, the ideological determinist is presumably unimpressed with the mere fact of change. The question is whether or not the change can be rational in the sense that the agent can be said to have good reasons for coming to believe differently.

Now obviously at this point in the argument much turns on what counts as a good reason. The proponent of the problem of ideology apparently holds (and Siegel seemingly agrees) that rational evaluation of ideological commitments is possible only if there are ideologically neutral reasons for belief, reasons which should have weight for all inquirers regardless of their ideological positions. However, says the defender of the pervasiveness of ideology, there are no such reasons because what counts as a reason is itself determined by one's ideology. For example, seventeenth century theorists argued against Galileo's discovery of the moons of Jupiter by holding that, because there are seven "windows" in the human head, the number of planets is necessarily seven. This mode of reasoning (the "language of correspondences") appears to us absurd but makes sense, Charles Taylor argues, given a view of the universe as exhibiting a meaningful order such that understanding it meant recognizing the place of humans within it and realizing the human telos. This world view backed the rule underlying the language of correspondences that the same principles hold in the "macrocosm" as in the "microcosm."⁷ A modern scientific world view which regards the universe as indifferent to human beings has no room for such analogies. As this example shows, whether or not one set of facts serves as a reason for believing a further proposition depends in very complex ways upon other things one holds to be true; ultimately, says the ideologist, it depends upon one's conceptual framework, world view, ideology. In the absence of such commitments, we would be left with only an abstract idea of reason which would remain empty (and so unserviceable) until given content by particular cultural and historical traditions. Hence genuine rational assessment of ideological commitments is not possible: ideology is prior to rationality.⁸

At least two responses to this argument are possible. One could deny that rational evaluation requires ideologically neutral reasons. Or one might deny the claim that what counts as a reason is

necessarily ideologically determined, that is, one might defend the proposition that there are neutral reasons. For the most part, Siegel takes the latter course, although in his work there are hints of the former position as well. Let us for convenience call the thesis that rational evaluation requires neutral reasons *transcendent rationality* and the other view (i.e., that rational evaluation is possible in the absence of neutral reasons) *immanent rationality*.⁹ How would each account of rational evaluation fare in responding to the ideology problem?

TRANSCENDENT RATIONALITY

In attempting to defend the view that there are neutral reasons, Siegel sets himself a difficult task, especially given his definition of ideology. For if ideology is a set of traditional patterns of belief, action, meaning, and justification found in a given culture, ideology would seem to include the traditions of rationality of that culture. If so, the relationship between rationality and ideology would appear to be that of part to whole. The "priority" of rationality could only mean that the traditions of rational criticism are among the most fundamental elements of ideology, beliefs that would be given up or modified last. In light of our traditions of rationality, it might be said, we criticize other aspects of our received ways of viewing the world including, paradoxically, our traditions of rationality themselves. In this direction lies immanent rationality, a view I will elaborate later. To remain within the framework of transcendent rationality, the individual must be thought of as having resources for rationality which transcend the culturally available traditions of rational thought. But this involves denying the proposition that rationality is always in fact "embodied in multiple evolving traditions," a view of Israel Scheffler's that Siegel cites approvingly.¹⁰ Foundationalism is one well known way of attempting to carry out this program. However, Siegel holds that his conception of rationality does not commit him to foundationalism.¹¹ What, then, is the content of transcendent rationality?

Siegel has argued in a variety of contexts that rational evaluation requires the presence of "paradigm-neutral" standards¹² by which comparison of contending paradigms together with their paradigm-bound standards can be made. Without such, "neutral," "non-question-begging" defenses,¹³ debate cannot "rightly be taken as rational."¹⁴ The reasons offered from this neutral, external standpoint, Siegel says, must "have epistemic force for all inquirers -- whatever their ideology -- who raise the question of their legitimacy."¹⁵ Why are neutral reasons required? Because any belief can be supported by reasons "sanctioned by the criteria of some world view or other," Siegel argues.¹⁶ Hence unless there exists some non-question-begging perspective, "rational" justification will turn out to be mere rationalization of one's beliefs, an empty and arbitrary exercise.

For the time being let us accept Siegel's arguments that rational evaluation requires paradigm-neutral standards of appraisal. Are we, then, ever in a position to engage in rational evaluation? Are we in possession of such standards and what might they be? Siegel's answer is clearest in the case of natural science where he regards "explanatory adequacy, scope, fertility, simplicity," and "predictive power" as neutral criteria which can be used to evaluate rival hypotheses and theories. These criteria constitute meta-standards which "speak to the relationship between hypothesis and evidence"; hence they help to explain why the reasons being offered are *good* reasons for accepting the hypothesis or theory.¹⁷ These criteria are said to function as "disciplinary ideals" which constitute "an absolute standard."¹⁸ The Kantian principle of respect for persons is tentatively offered as a candidate for a neutral reason in ethics, but Siegel realizes that some would deny its alleged neutrality.¹⁹

Thus far my account suggests that Siegel conceives of the domain of paradigm-independent criteria of evaluation as field specific, as "disciplinary ideals." But Siegel also argues that the content of rational evaluation will be supplied by a field-independent epistemology which will demonstrate that "good reasons in different fields, singled out as good by different field-specific criteria, nevertheless stand in the same relation to the beliefs they support despite their being singled out by disparate criteria."²⁰ This epistemology will be part of the content of the theory of critical thinking, but no examples are offered of what these criteria might be.

IMMANENT RATIONALITY

Given Siegel's repeated insistence on the necessity of neutral standards for rational evaluation, it comes as some surprise to find him responding to Mark Selman by arguing that, not only do "we have no Archimedian point from which to evaluate alternative cultures or ideologies," we do not need one:

We judge from where we are -- from where else could we judge? -- and we judge the strengths and limitations of our own position even as we occupy it in judging other matters. We can acknowledge the cultural origins of our conceptions of rationality and still utilize our best conception in evaluating alternative claims and ideologies, including our own.²¹

But if we judge in terms of our best conception of rationality, and others in terms of theirs, in the absence of neutral meta-standards for judging our competing conceptions, won't the debate cease to be rational according to the standard Siegel previously supported?

In the Postscript to *Educating Reason*, Siegel attempts a reconciliation of these two accounts. He acknowledges the truth of Scheffler's claim that

Rationality cannot be taken simply as an abstract and general ideal. It is embodied in multiple evolving traditions, in which the basic condition holds that issues are resolved by reference to reasons, themselves defined by principles purporting to be impartial and universal.²²

Hence Siegel acknowledges that the principles by which reasons are assessed develop and change within the context of growing and evolving rational traditions and he sees this as a problem for his conception of rationality which "presupposes principles which are general and impartial."²³ As a resolution of this problem, he suggests the following:

Principles embody rationality and define and assess reasons in a tradition at a time. As the tradition evolves, so do the principles which define and assess reasons....The principles which determine the compellingness of reasons at a time apply to all putative reasons impartially and universally; moreover, such principles still serve to embody rationality....As time goes on, the qualities which secure the legitimacy and force of reasons in a tradition may change, but rationality remains the same -- judgment and action in accord with reason, as determined by principles (which are themselves justified) crystallized at a time in a rational tradition.²⁴

Although this passage seems to fairly accurately describe our actual epistemic situation, rationality so construed does not seem to meet the test Siegel initially set for truly rational evaluation and debate. How does this conception of rationality satisfy the demand for neutral and non-question-begging evaluation of contending ideologies? Presumably, the proponents of two currently contending ideologies, each with its own evolving traditions of rational criticism, will each assess the other's claims in light of their own principles for the legitimacy and force of reasons, each taking their own principles to be impartial and universal. Thus, unless they happen to share a common rational tradition, or unless there is sufficient overlap to allow some foothold for mutually acceptable standards, the evaluation of each by the other would appear to be non-neutral and question-begging.²⁵

Is there, then, no sense in which reason is transcendent? Are we left with only the immanent conception? Putnam has argued that "reason is...both immanent (not to be found outside of concrete language games and institutions) and transcendent (a regulative idea that we use to criticize the conduct of *all* activities and institutions)."²⁶ We must understand transcendent reason in Putnam's sense, I think, as expressing a truth about what we ordinarily mean when we assert that one proposition provides a reason for believing another. Immanent reason, on the other hand, expresses the facts of our actual epistemic situation, that is, it provides the correct description of our practices of appraisal and evaluation. In asserting that R is a good reason for believing P, we don't usually mean to be relativizing the truth of our claim to our own conceptual framework, nor is any such relativizing implicit in what is said. However, evaluation, appraisal, reason-giving is in fact always

done from the perspective of some framework or other. As Thomas McCarthy has argued, "We can make historically situated and fallible claims to universal validity."²⁷

The disagreement I have with Siegel's account of transcendent rationality is that he often argues that the linguistic point embodied in Putnam's transcendent conception establishes the existence of neutral criteria of rationality to which we can have access and which we can then employ in the evaluation of competing frameworks. In "Rationality and Ideology," for example, he writes:

Rationality must...be *conceived of* as autonomous from ideological constraints and indeed as *providing the ground* from which alternative ideologies can themselves be evaluated.²⁸

I agree that rationality must be *conceived of* as autonomous from ideological constraints; our principles of rationality do purport to be "impartial and universal." But the only principles we have and can have are immanent in evolving traditions of rational criticism; we cannot stand on neutral ground.

RATIONAL EVALUATION RECONSIDERED

Is all rational evaluation bogus if there are no neutral reasons? In *Educating Reason* Siegel writes:

Either world views admit of rational appraisal in terms of non-question-begging criteria (supplied by the theory of critical thinking), or they do not. If not, then...we are left with a vicious form of relativism in which all "rational" disputes boil down to un-analyzable differences in world view. In this case, critical thinking is a chimera, since no bit of thinking ever fails to be critical; all thinking is "critical" in that it is sanctioned by the criteria of some world view or other, and "critical thinking" fails to pick out any preferred set of pieces of "good" thinking...Critical thinking collapses as a coherent notion distinct from "uncritical" thinking and as an educational desideratum.²⁹

But even if our commitment to critical thinking stems from commitment to a prior ideal, it does not follow that our commitment is arbitrary. If we are told that all progressive educational philosophies advance science, democracy, and human perfection, there's a prior ideology, but also a means for the evaluation and justification of educational philosophies. Whether or not a given educational philosophy meets the tests suggested is not an arbitrary matter; thus the prior commitment gives grounds for rejecting some views and accepting others. Even if our ultimate commitments are simply matters of existential choice or are determined by our culture or our human nature, these basic commitments make some lesser commitments rational and others not. If ultimate commitments so understood are in some appropriate sense "arbitrary" (and I would not agree that they are), "arbitrariness" does not distribute down the chain of reasoning to other commitments made reasonable by the initial ones. B can be a reason for A, even if there are no reasons for B, even if B were simply an existential choice.

Nor does it follow that we will be unable to distinguish critical from uncritical thinking. Critical thinkers are initiated to traditions of rational criticism which they are disposed to use in examining their own and others beliefs and conduct. It is not likely that any and all beliefs or practices can meet the test of a *given* tradition of rationality. (If so, then that "critical" tradition is indeed without content.) Even if all thinking were "critical" from the perspective of some tradition or other, critical thinkers, like other human beings, do not change their world views from one moment to the next. Indeed, someone who did alter critical tests to suit preexisting beliefs and practices would not be a critical thinker. For someone who holds a *particular* set of evaluative principles, it is always possible that a given belief will fail the test.

What is rational evaluation like in the absence of neutral standards? This is, of course, a substantial research problem on which many are working. In general we need to reject the false dilemma that says that either we are "imprisoned" within our own framework (which cannot be rationally evaluated since what counts as "rational" is specified by the framework itself) or there must be framework neutral criteria of rationality. The solutions take the form of showing how one can

recognize inadequacies in a form of thinking and amend it even while employing it. Thus critical thinking remains a possible educational ideal on these construals, but now critical thinking must be conceived of without the aid of "neutral reasons."

CRITICAL THINKING AS AN EDUCATIONAL IDEAL

Siegel holds that critical thinking is coextensive with rationality. For him, one who plans a trip wisely is a critical thinker. A critical thinker, Siegel says, "is one who is appropriately moved by reasons." Such a person must have a disposition to "believe and act in accordance with reasons" and the ability "properly to assess the force of reasons in the many contexts in which reasons play a role."³⁰ Believing and acting on the basis of reasons is a condition most human beings will meet, unless nothing will count as "reasons" except reasons that are *good* in light of some objective standard. Otherwise, normal persons not suffering from some psychological impairment that makes it impossible for them to act as they think best or from some cognitive deficiency (for example, such as that of the paranoid which makes reasonable belief states impossible) will believe and act on the basis of reasons for the most part in at least a minimal sense. This minimal state of rationality is what S. I. Benn calls "autarchy," the condition presupposed by being an agent.³¹

Thus, if critical thinking is thought of as a normative educational ideal which many of us would not meet without special attention and effort, the salient condition must be the second one, the reflexive turn in which one is able to assess one's putative reasons for acting and believing. At this point, critical thinking is part of a complex of ideals which has included autonomy, emancipation, enlightenment, heightened reflectiveness. As Benn puts it, for the autonomous person,

the set of beliefs, values, and principles by which he [or she] governs his [or her] life are not supplied ready-made, but are the outcome of a still-continuing process of criticism and re-evaluation.³²

Critical thinking will be shown to be an empty ideal if there are never good grounds for adopting one point of view rather than another, so making sense of rational evaluation is one element in a defense of that ideal. But ultimately, the propensity and disposition to engage in such reflection in a wide range of areas is part of a moral and political outlook which must be more broadly defended in terms of the kind of life it enables. Communitarians, for example, have criticized the view of self and other which they hold such critical reflectiveness involves. So the epistemic defense of critical thinking goes only a part of the way toward a defense of critical thinking as an educational ideal.

Bernard Williams asserts that "the urge to reflective understanding of society and our activities goes deeper and is more widely spread in modern society than it has ever been before."³³ For Benn, such reflectiveness is possible as an ideal only in a plural tradition. Thus the presence of what Robin Horton calls "inter-theoretic competition" in modern societies may help explain the "peculiar level of reflectiveness" Williams finds in the modern world where many societies have "traditions of self-reappraisal and institutions to carry that tradition."³⁴ It is a serious question whether there is any non-repressive route back from this reflectiveness even if we were to judge that such heightened self-consciousness is not altogether a good thing. But defenders of the tradition generally share the Socratic assumptions that reflection leads to knowledge and that one is better off with knowledge than without it. Once those claims would have been thought self-evident, but in today's intellectual climate they must be defended. In this paper, I have joined Siegel's effort to defend the first assumption, but have merely pointed toward the need to undertake a defense of the second.

1. Richard Bernstein, "The Rage Against Reason," in *Construction and Constraint: The Shaping of Scientific Rationality*, ed. Ernan McMullin (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 216.

2. Harvey Siegel, *Educating Reason* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 32.

3. Harvey Siegel, "Rationality and Ideology," *Educational Theory* 37, no. 2 (1987): 153.
4. Ibid., 156.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 158.
7. Charles Taylor, "Rationality," in *Rationality and Relativism*, ed. Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1982), 94-97.
8. It is unclear from Siegel's discussion whether or not the ideologist thinks that rational evaluation of other, less fundamental, beliefs such as educational ideals is possible given prior ideological commitments which determine the force and scope of reasons. Siegel himself seems to hold that if ideology is the fundamental starting point, all "rational" evaluation is bogus.
9. I adopt this terminology from Hilary Putnam, "Why Reason Can't be Naturalized," *Synthese* 52 (1982): 8. However, the meaning I assign here to these terms differs from Putnam's.
10. Israel Scheffler as quoted in Siegel, *Educating Reason*, 134.
11. Harvey Siegel, *Relativism Refuted* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1987), 165.
12. Ibid., 71.
13. Siegel, "Rationality and Ideology," 160.
14. Siegel, *Relativism Refuted*, 89.
15. Siegel, "Rationality and Ideology," 164.
16. Siegel, *Educating Reason*, 14.
17. Siegel, *Relativism Refuted*, 128 and 65.
18. Ibid., 132. Even if criteria such as explanatory adequacy, simplicity, etc. are taken as paradigm-neutral standards of judgment, they do not serve to conclusively settle debate in natural science; different judgments can be equally rational in light of these criteria. In other areas of inquiry (literacy criticism, for example) no common set of meta-standards, no shared disciplinary ideal seems to exist. Indeed the bitterest debates appear to be about the standards themselves.
19. Siegel, "Rationality and Ideology," 160-61.
20. Siegel, *Educating Reason*, 37.
21. Harvey Siegel, "Rationality and Ideology Revisited (Reply to Cato and Selman)," *Educational Theory* 38, no. 2 (1988): 272. See also Mark Selman, "Ideology and What? A Response to Harvey Siegel," *Educational Theory* 38, no. 2 (1988): 261-65.
22. Israel Scheffler as quoted in Siegel, *Educating Reason*, 134.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid., 135.
25. There is, perhaps, another interpretation of this passage. Note that Siegel says that rationality is belief and action in accordance with principles "which are themselves justified." Justified according to what principles, one wants to ask? Does this mean that each tradition of rationality embodies to a greater or lesser degree the "correct" or "justified" principles of rationality which are themselves tradition independent? And action and belief are rational only to the extent that they accord with the correct principles, *however* one's tradition defines rationality? Is so, then we are back to transcendent rationality but with an important difference. Now Siegel acknowledges that we have no direct access to the correct, tradition-independent principles of rationality, so these paradigm neutral reasons no longer provide "external, neutral standards by which rival claims and reasons can be judged." (*Relativism Refuted*, 84) This solution appears to invite skepticism. We *may* be judging and acting rationally, but the only criteria of judgment we have are those embodied in our traditions and they may or may not correspond to the "justified" principles.
26. Putnam, "Why Reason Can't be Naturalized," 8.
27. Thomas McCarthy, in *Construction and Constraint*, 82.

28. Siegel, "Rationality and Ideology," 162-63, (my italics).
29. Siegel, *Educating Reason*, 14.
30. Ibid., 23.
31. S. I. Benn, "Freedom, Autonomy, and the Concept of a Person," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 12, 1976, 113.
32. Ibid., 124.
33. Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 163.
34. Benn, "Freedom, Autonomy, and the Concept of a Person," 128; Robin Horton, "Tradition and Modernity Revisited," in *Rationality and Relativism*, 227; Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 163.

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